

PICKET LADIES

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CHARACTERS

Clara Lemlich- 21 years old, Ukrainian woman of Jewish descent. Bold, stoic, a fighter.

Providenza Panno- 43 years old, Italian immigrant, mother of eight children. Doubtful, family-oriented, a follower.

Kate Leone- 13-14 years old, 2nd generation American with Italian and German roots. An impressionable, budding, young activist, a devout follower.

Rosale Panno- 18 years old, daughter of Providenza. Escaped the fire without injury.

TIME

1909

PLACE

Greenwich Village, Manhattan, a street

(A rabble of shouts and feet stomping is heard, vibrating through the room. As it dies down, the voice of CLARA LEMLICH is heard saying: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise!" The rabble comes back and through the shouts and feet stomping, a chant of STRIKE rings through the room. The sound of a bang is heard that signals the chant to end abruptly)

(We see PROVIDENZA PANNO and KATE LEONE on stage behind a barricade wearing sashes saying: PICKET LADIES TAILORS STRIKERS.)

KATE

(gripping the railing)

You all look so high and mighty, standing there clutching your weapons! Are they not enough? Can they not do the job for you that you let those rats beat us? That's right...just stand there and stare at us like circus animals! Too afraid to stand up to a girl?

Providenza pulls Kate back, still standing her ground, watching the officers.

What's the matter with you?

PROVIDENZA

Do you want to give them cause to hurt you?

KATE

No! It's fun to steam up their frustration at us. They only beat us because they are afraid of us. It's not enough for them to do it in the privacy of their homes that they must make a spectacle of it in public.

PROVIDENZA

And? What will you do when the cause you have given them makes them hurt you?

KATE

I will get right up and taunt them again. They cannot stand to see a woman retaliate.

PROVIDENZA

You are far too young to be doing this.

KATE

What do I have left to lose, Providence? It is just as Clara said. If this strike fails, no change will happen. We will both go back to our factory jobs forced to work for men, just like those rats, to make little to nothing in return.

PROVIDENZA

Is that not what we came here for?

Pause.

I am tired, too, but I came here to give my family a good life. I think your parents are doing the same, no? They care enough to endure the long hours to put food on your plate. What kind of a mother am I if I am not helping my family?

KATE

I once saw a girl a little younger than me collapse at her station. I watched in horror as they took her from the workroom as if she was just a doll that had fallen to the floor. Do you know what happened?

Pause.

Not one of those workers stopped what they were doing. They knew if they stopped, they would suffer the consequences. They knew they could end up like her... or worse. They could have lost their job and then where would they be?

PROVIDENZA

What happened to the girl? The *ragazza malata*?

KATE

We never saw her again.

Silence

We have nothing to lose if we take a stand for what is right.

*A commotion is heard offstage.
Applause is heard through the
voices. Clara enters the stage. She is
in pain. She tries not to show it.*

PROVIDENZA

Clara, where have you been? The others thought you had abandoned the cause.

CLARA

Abandon the cause? They must think me mad!

Pause.

Did you believe them?

PROVIDENZA

...

KATE

(jokingly)

She is fresh off the boat, Clara.

CLARA

The only things you should believe are what come directly from my lips. This cause I will never abandon.

KATE

Then where were you? Our leader vanishes...we were lost. What do you expect us to do?

CLARA

You see those *dogs* over there. The ones who raise their weapons at you when given the slightest look in their direction? They are the ones who are supposed to protect us yet they stand against us. We should feel safe with them by our side. You agree, no? We have given no cause for them to beat us so.

KATE

Your sash, Clara? Where is it?

CLARA

Ripped from my body.

KATE

Take mine, then. I can make another.

Kate removes her sash and puts it around Clara as if it is a medal.

CLARA

I suspect they had enough of me. So tired of me that they would turn their eyes from the ones who attacked me.

PROVIDENZA

Clara...

Kate is stunned.

CLARA

We are no villains, women, remember this. The only villains in this world are those who treat the poor and needy like dirt beneath their feet. We strike not only for better treatment as workers, not only for better treatment as women but for better treatment as individuals.

PROVIDENZA

All this fighting...all this suffering...is it really worth it? I stand here at a fence yelling and shouting for change...but where is it? Every minute I stand here, my children grow hungry. I have no money to put food in their mouths. You two are lucky that you are still young. Work is all I have ever known, Clara. My family needs me.

CLARA

And we need you as much as every other woman here!

Pause.

If you will not stand here for yourself, stand here for *us*! Stand here and scream and yell in support of what we are doing, yes? Protest not only with the women who physically stand here but also for the women who were taken from us because of the poor conditions we have endured for too long.

PROVIDENZA

This fighting is getting us nowhere. Look around us. We scream and we raise our signs but they do not listen to us.

CLARA

That is because they choose not to listen to us. But one day, we will be so loud that no one can ignore the storm that awaits them. Don't you feel it brewing inside of you? Inside of all of us?

Pause.

This fight is for something much greater than working conditions. Something we will not live to see but will be remembered for. The men at Cooper's Union laughed at my call for a strike. I laughed back at them! They believe us weak and lesser than them. Those across from us think the same thing too. Even the ones we work for believe it. You see it, don't you? This strike is not only for change now. We must all think toward the future of our society.

KATE

I hear it, Clara! I feel it! I stand with you!

CLARA

They thought we could not band together as women and organize a protest. They believe all we are good for is simple housework. Remember this, women, we are just as capable of everything they do.

PROVIDENZA

If they stop us? What then? What will you do?

CLARA

Start all over again. This is a continuous battle that will not end if we lose or win. The conditions we work in are not suitable even for a dog. We fight for our rights as people.

KATE

If she is not for us and our cause, she should not wear that sash.

Kate goes to take it from Providenza.

Clara holds Kate back.

KATE

She's a louse! A yegg! She says she's for us but would rather go back to a life where she gets treated like she's nothing! Do something, Clara. You always know what to do.

*Clara steps toward Providenza as
Kate watches intently with a smile on
her face.*

CLARA

The sash fits you well, Providence.

Kate's smile vanishes. She goes to protest. Clara turns to face Kate.

Whether she supports us directly or indirectly, she has every right to wear that sash.

Clara looks back at Providenza.

What do you want, Providence, more than anything in the world?

Providenza thinks.

KATE

How would she know? She cannot think for herself! She cannot even decide if she is for or against us.

CLARA

This is just what they want! This arguing and incessant bickering must stop! Do you want them to see us like this? If we even give them a reason to think we are weak, they will find a way to end our strife and I assure you it will not be pleasant. We must come together despite all our beliefs in the world as one thing is certain. *We* are not animals. *We* are not the work that we do. *We* are not put on this earth to please anyone but ourselves.

Silence.

We are *women* and we stand united as one to fight for a greater cause. We stand against the opposite sex in spite of the sufferings they put us through. We are people, too, lest we forget.

KATE

What do you want, Providence? There's nothing left for us to lose when all is said and done. We will go back to our humdrum lives. Who will remember a follower?

PROVIDENZA

I want to be called by my name.

Clara and Kate are confused. Have they been saying it wrong this whole time?

CLARA

We do.

PROVIDENZA

You do not. My name is Providenza Bucalo Panno and I came to this country with two of my children and fourteen dollars in my pocket. I was, and still am, willing to put my life on the line for them and do everything I can to give them a good life. When I got to my port, the man asked my name. He said if I was going to America, my name would do me no good, no good at all. He wrote Providence and sent me on my way. When I came to the island, Providence became my name. I got work as Providence and started a new life as her. She is the one who works in the factory fourteen hours a day, slaving away to ensure her family is provided for. She is the one taking control of my life.

Silence.

Just as you have said, we are people too...and Providenza is a person too...lest we forget.

CLARA

Okay. Let me ask you again. What do you want, *Providenza*.

Providenza does not think. She knows.

PROVIDENZA

I want to stand with you, united, and make change for us. I want to wear this sash as a symbol of my devotion to this cause. I want to riot and call for the better treatment of our persons. I want to be able to sleep at night knowing my children will not have to endure the same things I am going through. I want to ensure my Rosale, *mia figlia*, will be safe wherever she works. I came here in hopes of living a better life and find myself in the same situation. Providenza Bucalo Panno can stand it no longer! The conditions in which we work to live are not acceptable! I would rather starve quick than starve slow!

Clara puts her hand out. Providenza takes it. Kate watches.

CLARA/PROVIDENZA

We'd rather starve quick than starve slow!

Their chant continues as Kate watches in delight. She joins in softly and soon her voice begins to grow. Providenza is the first to turn forward, facing the officers, still holding on to Clara's hand. Clara then turns and raises her free hand into the air in a fist. After a few chants, Kate takes hold of Clara's free hand. The two look at one another and smile before turning forward to face the officers.

They chant louder and soon voices offstage are heard repeating the chant. The three women look at each other and cannot help but smile in delight as they chant, hand in hand. The voices become loud enough that they vibrate through the space. The chanting gets softer and softer until it is barely a whisper. We hear Clara's lone voice yell: We'd rather starve quick than starve slow. Immediate blackout.

2 years later. Sounds of screaming and water rushing are heard. Sirens are going off. A spotlight on Clara as she looks on horrified. The screaming can be heard as the soft chant of "Strike!" begins to rise. As the chants and screams reach their climax, Clara rips the sash from her body. She turns her back to the audience and the spotlight goes away. The chant of strike soon drowns out the screaming until all that can be heard is "Strike!" As the chant ends, the sound of a body falling to the ground can be heard.

The stage is bare except for the bodies that lay on the floor with white sheets over them. Clara enters with ROSALE PANNINO. They are searching among the bodies. Clara is determined as Rosale is terrified.

Clara searches among them, grimacing at the bodies as she lifts the sheets. One leaves her completely mortified. She is “convulsed by hysterical laughter and tears.”

ROSALE

You found your cousin?

CLARA

No.

Pause.

Have you found your mother?

ROSALE

No.

Pause.

Who did you find?

Rosale continues searching.

CLARA

I found Kate. Young, sweet Kate.

Silence.

How could they have not signed the agreement? How could they have willingly gone to a place of work that did not care about them? How could your mother ever do that?

ROSALE

It was work. We needed money. That’s what it always comes down to, isn’t it?

Rosale flips a sheet. She is overwhelmed by the sight. Clara rushes over. It is Providenza. Clara consoles Rosale as Clara stares at her body.

CLARA

Let us pray that she went quickly in the fire...not slow.

*Rosale weeps into Clara's shoulder.
Clara reflects. She is seething.*

CLARA

(whispering)

If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.

Curtain.